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# **Young men's body dissatisfaction: A qualitative analysis of anonymous online accounts**

Whitaker, C.; Gough, B.; Fawkner, H.; Deighton-Smith, N.

## Introduction

Research indicates widespread malaise in relation to self-perceptions of the body and its appearance (Tiggemann, 2015), with reports of negative body appraisals in boys as young as six (Murray and Touyz, 2012). Body dissatisfaction (BD) is linked not only to negative health outcomes, such as deliberate self-harm (Greydanus and Apple, 2011), pathological body change strategies such as muscle enhancement through anabolic-androgenic steroid use (Greenway and Price, 2018), depressed mood (Holsen et al., 2001), distress (Cohane and Pope, 2001; Mitchison et al., 2017), social anxiety (Di Blasi et al., 2015), and suicidal ideation (Brausch and Muehlenkamp, 2007), but also to problems in educational engagement and personal development (e.g. Duncan et al., 2016; Choi and Choi, 2016). While intervention and health education strategies targeting children and adolescents have reported some success (e.g. Yager et al., 2013; O'Dea, 2005), and a reduction in the prevalence of BD for women over time has been noted (Karazsia et al., 2017), no similar progress has been reported for men and boys, with evidence suggesting rising numbers of young men experiencing BD (e.g. Cohane and Pope, 2001; Murray and Griffiths, 2015) and related pathological health outcomes such as disordered eating behaviours (Murray et al., 2017; Sweeting et al., 2015). The rise in prevalence of BD in men has reached such levels that it is now widely suggested to be 'normative' (Jankowski et al., 2018: 1). Given these findings, it is imperative that further investigation focusses on gaining a clearer understanding of the specific issues faced by men and boys regarding BD.

Body Image (BI) research has traditionally focused upon the development of pathological eating behaviours in young Western women (Cash and Smolak, 2011). However, a marked increase in exploration of male BI since the 1980s (see Grogan, 2017) has provided an improved understanding of the qualitatively diverse nature of BI and related wellbeing concerns for males and females (Gough et al., 2016); informing gender-specific early interventions (McCabe et al., 2017). Nonetheless, despite this progress, and indeed, renewed identification of "the complexity of male body image" (Swenson and Allen, 2018: 8), and the requirement for increased male specific investigation (e.g. Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018: 1008; Wang et al., 2018: 9), there is limited work on young men's personal accounts of BD and its impact. This concern is reflected in a recent report published by the British Youth Council, which looked specifically at the current state of knowledge and progress in regards to BD in young people, advising the government to make provisions for the rapid exploration of "the distinctive challenges faced by young men" (2017: 13).

Taking this forward, evidence indicates that discontent in relation to the body is particularly prominent during the adolescent period (Nelson et al., 2018), and that young men may be just as concerned with their BI as young women (**Lonegran et al., 2019**; Murray and Touyz, 2012). In addition, mental health conditions such as Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Muscle Dysmorphia - in which an individual is consistently preoccupied with supposed (but often tangibly absent) imperfections in their appearance/muscularity - appear to be increasing rapidly among young men (Murray and

Griffiths, 2015). Even so, perhaps as a result of the historically gendered focus of BI research, and thus available literature, social dissemination of findings has traditionally revolved around women and girls. Therefore, despite evidence of some parity in relation to appearance concerns and behaviours associated with BD (Lonergan et al., 2019: 41), findings highlighting the greater prominence of BI-related issues for females, such as BD (Karazsia et al., 2017), weight-teasing (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Menzel et al., 2010) and disordered eating behaviours (Dahlgren et al., 2017), as well as the increased exposure to harmful sociocultural appearance ideals (Buote et al., 2011), understandably appear to have dominated social discussion. However, while public awareness of these findings is undoubtedly essential to increase critical engagement with the harmful social norms aimed at women, a resulting feminisation of the topic and related health implications (e.g. O'Hara and Smith, 2007) has hindered attempts to gain insight into the experiences of men and boys.

For example, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2006), indicated that male participant's consideration of BI as a 'feminine or gay issue' (p. 567) often constrained discussion. Similar findings were also reported by Kehler and Atkinson (2015), suggesting that social understanding of BI remains shrouded by discourses of femininity. Further, Jankowski (2016) reported that men appear less likely or willing to disclose dissatisfaction than women, at least not directly or immediately. Arguably then, engagement in discussion and disclosure around BD by men may be compromised by dominant discourses around masculinity. Relatedly, there is ample evidence indicating that in regards to sensitive issues and health related concerns, help seeking is also problematised by prevailing ideals of masculinity (Aim et al., 2018; Magaard et al., 2017; Seidler et al., 2016; Georgakakou-Koutsonikou and Williams, 2017), which may also complicate male BI research. Therefore, given the feminisation of the topic allied with the inhibiting impact of masculinity norms, it could be that non-disclosure of BD is utilized as a method of limiting individual status reduction or 'masculinity credits' (De Visser and Smith, 2007: 604). Thus, while no longer overlooked as an area requiring investigation, understanding young male BI-related health issues may remain obstructed by participants' concerns that they "aren't supposed to worry about such things" (Pope et al., 2000: , p. xiv).

With these points in mind, constraints on disclosure are seldom taken into account in current investigative measures of prevalence or influential factors of development. Indeed, it may be argued that, invited to complete self-report measures of BD, there may be a tendency for men to downplay any negative self-perceptions as a result of a 'masculine' expectations for non-disclosure. In addition, much research surrounding BI-related pathology relies heavily on methods developed predominantly for women (Dahlgren et al., 2017), including measures for a 'Drive for Thinness' (e.g. Cruz-Sáez et al., 2018), previously identified as problematic for investigation with men and boys (Cohane and Pope, 2001). Even in instances of modification to allow for a supposed gendered divide in concerns to be identified and measured, for men this is often reduced to measuring the prevalence for a "drive for muscularity" (Murray and Touyz, 2012: 231). As a result, such measures often fail to take into account other gendered body-related concerns, such as penis size, which are known to be a considerable source of anxiety and dissatisfaction (Johnston et al., 2014; Veale et al., 2015). This could account for the disparity of previous accounts of prevalence of dissatisfaction, suggested to range

between 40% and 70%, depending on the specific measure utilised (British Youth Council, 2017). Therefore, it seems evident that efforts to explore male BI may require alternatives to traditional methods, not only to identify just how widespread dissatisfaction is, but also to increase understanding of wider social influences which may impede progress of a gender specific theory of BD development.

This present study examines young men's individual accounts of BD, offered in response to a journalist's request for contributions within an online newspaper article addressing the prevalence of young men's BI concerns. In addition, this paper aims to identify patterns in wider societal understanding and discussion of men's BI and related issues, as highlighted in reader's comments in response to the published article. In doing so, our study was guided by the broad research question: 'What social discourses surround (and constrain) male body image within online accounts?'.

## Method

### Data collection

This paper is based on qualitative analysis of five personal accounts relating to BI experiences of young men aged 17-20 years presented in a newspaper article (dataset 1), and ensuing reader comments in response to the accounts/article (dataset 2). The product of participatory journalism (Singer, 2011), and produced independently of our own research agenda, the data production environment offered a unique insight into social construction of male BI. The newspaper article featured followed another by the same author three days previously, discussing findings from a recent BI survey with young men conducted for the Advertising Standards Agency (CREDOS, 2016). Within this initial article, the author highlights a tendency for BI issues to be persistently framed as a predominantly female concern and a propensity for young men's non-disclosure, whilst also requesting contributions of personal stories of BI-related issues from them. It is essential to keep in mind that personal accounts may not have been published in their raw form, and thus open to journalistic input. Nonetheless, the five personal accounts presented for public engagement and consumption constitute powerful resources for social awareness and discussion of health-related topics (Sweeting et al., 2015). Therefore, whilst possible editing poses limitations to assessing the authenticity of personal accounts, comprising between 160 and 244 words, and published in the form of first-person narratives, the accounts nonetheless provide rich insights into BI experiences of young men while also allowing us to situate the subsequent online discussion.

Reader's comments were posted directly to the newspaper website, submitted over the duration of the subsequent three days, and provided a total of 123 individual comments, made by 58 distinctive individual contributors, and generating 42 threads (a sequence of responses to an initial post). Determining gender identity and age of readers was problematic given the option to remain anonymous or to create a non-identifiable username. Therefore, despite the use of male pseudonyms, unless contributions in the comment section provided insight into their gender identity, gender is unknown. However, in an attempt to provide some context, the newspaper considers itself a UK

“quality newspaper”, with typical readership information indicating an average reader age of 48, who is well educated, and relatively affluent (Guardian, 2012).

All data utilised is freely available for public view, without the requirement to sign into a password protected account. Thus, in concurrence with the ‘Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research’ (British Psychological Society, 2017), attempting to gain informed consent from contributors was unnecessary. For the purpose of this study, self-created usernames of contributors were considered equivalent to participant names, and thus replaced with pseudonyms to reduce the possibility of compromising anonymity. The study gained ethical approval from the university’s local ethics board on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

## Procedure

The study was underpinned by a critical realist perspective, and utilised Braun and Clarke’s method for thematic analysis (TA) (2006; 2013). Firstly, we analysed the personal accounts within the newspaper article (dataset 1), which were extracted from the full online article. Next, the entire comment section was downloaded (dataset 2). An inductive (data-driven) analysis was conducted, focusing on patterns of semantic content, but also paying attention to wider discourses (e.g. of gender) and positioning of particular subjects (e.g. adolescents) – a form of constructionist TA we have used before with other online datasets (e.g. Gough, 2016).

Each analysis began with data familiarisation by repeated reading of the entire dataset. Subsequently, recursive coding was applied to printed copies of the data. This phase created a plethora of initial, precise codes in each dataset (e.g., ‘not talked about’, ‘insecurity’, ‘anxiety’). Following this, coded extracts of text were re-examined and collated to sculpt broader semantic categories (or initial themes) which signified recurring elements of meaning. Through a process of continued reflexivity, it became evident that initial themes could be consolidated into five overarching themes (two for dataset 1: personal accounts, and three for dataset 2: response posts). Initial analyses were conducted by the first named author, a white, early career qualitative researcher in her mid-thirties, whose research focuses specifically on young male BI. Subsequently, an ongoing process of discussion between all authors (with two females and one male, all white and offering different levels of experience and expertise relating to BI, masculinities and qualitative research) was initiated, first to discuss and agree on themes, and subsequently informing interpretation.

## Results

### Dataset 1 - Young Men’s Personal Accounts

#### Male body worries require concealment

An overarching theme of everyday concealment of perceived physical shortcomings was emphasised by these young men. Additionally, it seems that concealment was understood to offer a form of protection:

....worries about being scrawny mean I can't wear T-shirts or any close-fitting clothes. I feel uncomfortable without a jacket to shield me, so I fear hot days when I have to leave the house without one.

(Danny)

I could never go swimming or topless on a beach because I just don't look good.

(Danny)

Particularly interesting is Danny's proposal that he '*can't*' wear particular items of clothing, or participate in certain activities, unless the act of concealment is adopted. As such, this suggests some level of prohibition rather than personal choice, indicating a reduction in individual agency in physical concealment. However, Chris implicates an additional level of concealment: the suppression of psychological consequences of BD for the individual:

I often feel embarrassed to take my top off, especially with friends because I don't know what they will say, so I try to keep my tops a little baggy. Young men don't talk about their own bodies in a negative way because they could get bullied, and younger men, especially, see their issues as weaknesses for others to exploit.

(Chris)

Not only does this suggest that perceived physical deficiency requires concealment, but any discussion of such deficits are deemed taboo. Moreover, a failure to conceal may engender discomfort and uncertainty among friends, or even bullying by peers. These accounts indicate an acute sensitivity towards direct or indirect disclosure of individual experiences of BD. Nonetheless, these young men appeared to welcome the opportunity to anonymously disclose BD for the newspaper article. Therefore, it seems that there may be some level of discontent with the act of concealment, as indicated in the following excerpt:

I don't think young men necessarily worry about their body image more than girls, but the problem is that we don't talk about it. All my body worries really affect my mood.

(Aaron)

The comparison here between genders positions body-related concerns as a universal phenomenon, with difference arising in the way in which these are attended to. Indeed, by highlighting the absence of discussion as 'the problem', concealment may be understood by young men as an unwelcome requirement.

### Lack of discussion and visibility fuel insecurity

The prevalence (and indeed concealment) of male BD appears to be understood by these young men as somewhat normative, yet seldom discussed. However, as the following

comments indicate, a lack of dialogue may be considered an influencing factor for the development of BD in the first place:

Young men are obsessed with body image and worry about it every bit as much as young women do. Their worries can sometimes be more acute because there is so little debate about how images of “perfect” male bodies are used by the media. Whereas most girls are made aware that they [pictures in the media] are often unrealistic, there is no similar attempt to educate young men about body image. I am constantly anxious about the way I look in public....  
(Danny)

Here, young men are portrayed as invariably preoccupied with appearance, a situation exacerbated by a lack of recognition or critical debate around male BD issues, and contrasted with the perceived attention to and education around female BD. In the comment below, Benjamin implicates dominant ideals of masculinity as a barrier to individual engagement with open discussion:

The ubiquity and extremity of internet porn has also opened up a whole new world of insecurities around penis size for men. Add that to an aggressively macho sports culture that worships strength and often denies men a chance to express their problems and you have the perfect storm for bottled-up anxiety, poor self-image and body dysphoria.  
(Benjamin)

The twin examples of porn and ‘macho’ sports are linked to particular (unrealistic) expectations for men, generating insecurities, self-esteem issues and distorted self-image. These personal accounts suggest that lack of discussion may contribute not only to individual concealment of BD, but also the development of dissatisfaction, due to unrealistic expectations remaining unchallenged. Thus, these accounts suggest that while individuals may be acutely aware that social ideals are often unrealistic, male-centred discussion is limited by wider masculine norms. As a result, a culture of concealment with regards to young mens’ BD predominates.

## **Dataset 2 – Response posts**

### **Body dissatisfaction as an adolescent phenomenon**

Overall, reader responses position those disclosing BD in the newspaper article as vulnerable victims of life stage and social context:

It seems to be a part of many boys childhoods, and many girls too to think that they are ugly, fat, scrawny, spotty and the rest.  
(Ash)



Ash implies that the experience of BD is almost expected during the process of development for all young people, irrespective of gender. Similarly, the following comments by Quentin and Dave also implicate life-stage and suggest that BD will be overcome with time:

Yes, and the reasons are fairly obvious I think, at school nearly everyone is insecure because they are younger ages. [...] Most people grow out of this just fine  
(Quentin)

[...] looking back.... I just know i was... PERFECTLY GORGEOUS. Ride the waves of life boys et voila [...]. [sic].  
(Dave)

Taken together, these comments appear to imply an almost universal preoccupation with perceived bodily imperfections during adolescence – a preoccupation which is deemed unnecessary from an older vantage point. Indeed, Robert presents this (temporary) situation as ‘normal’:

It is perfectly normal for teenagers to be insecure. Adults not so much. No story here unless your interviewees are in their thirties.  
(Robert)

Some respondents point to culture as well as time:

My advise is just to wait it out. I found the culture at university and beyond totally different to the brutal environment of school, where any slight deviation would be mocked brutally.  
(Andy)

So, in late adolescence as young people move out of the (‘brutal’) school environment body image issues may recede within cultures perceived to be more relaxed, such as university.

In positioning BD as a predictable symptom of the life stage, regardless of gender, reader’s responses normalise the experience of BD for young men. In addition, while social context is acknowledged, by positioning young male BD as a normative - and somewhat inconsequential - experience of maturation, this understanding effectively works to circumnavigate the young male participants’ (dataset 1) suggestions of a wider social issue requiring attention. For example, if BD is considered to be expected and relatively trivial, any possible efforts to address sociocultural barriers to male discussion may be considered a futile endeavour.

### **Lifestyle advice to reduce avoidable dissatisfaction.**

Many readers could be seen to address their comments directly to the young men in question, adopting a superior subject position to suggest possible methods to reduce their

BD. This theme predominantly relied on the implicit understanding that those experiencing BD both wanted and required physical modification to reduce dissatisfaction:

Put down your phones, stop looking at other people's perfect lives on social media, get some fresh air and exercise [...].  
(Colin)

Here, Colin draws on the possible negative impact of social media discussed by the author of the newspaper article. However, despite Danny's (dataset 1) indication that young men may require additional education to enable critical engagement with such materials, Colin appears to suggest that social media use should simply be avoided. As such, Colin's simplistic advice works to invalidate the proposal for increased critical engagement, placing the responsibility on the individual to self-monitor their practices instead. Colin's additional advice pertaining to physical exercise is echoed by Luke:

Going to the gym and exercising will not only make you healthier, but also give you confidence because you will feel you are doing something about the areas of your body you are unhappy with.  
(Luke)

Luke's advice is clearly underpinned by the understanding that those experiencing BD do not currently attend a gym, and both desire and are in a position to increase their physical activity. Importantly, this comment shows no regard for the fact that those experiencing BD may not require physical modification, and neglects social or individual factors (such as time, access or physical disability) that may present barriers to doing so. This oversight was evident in many of the comments throughout the dataset, such as the following by Nile:

These concerns can be easily addressed by taking some exercise or doing some sport  
(Nile)

Constructed upon the assumption that those experiencing BD are not currently physically active or healthy, these comments appear to suggest that BD results from avoidable self-negligence. As such, this discourse locates responsibility at the individual level, implying that BD is, in part, an outcome of poor choices, such as a lack of physical exercise. However, opposition to assumptions of idleness underpinning this theme was evident, as the following comments indicate:

Know that its the job of the combined forces of advertisers to make you feel shit about yourself, in the hope that you decide spending your money on their products will help - and smile wryly at it.  
(Quentin)

In contrast to the previous comments, Quentin does not implicate individual physical composition in the experience of BD. Instead BD is presented as a problem manufactured by consumerism, which relies on the continued discontent of individuals in order to drive sales of products marketed to reduce dissatisfaction. As such, Quentin's comment works to suggest causal factors outside of the individual, questioning the validity of apportioning responsibility at this level. Additional caution is advised by Matty, who suggests that lifestyle solutions may be unreliable:

[...] it's not good advice to tell someone who has a body image issue that going to the gym is necessary [*sic*] going to solve their problem. Some of the most insecure people I have met are the ones who very regularly go to the gym in an endless battle to get the perfect body, which they never end up happy with.  
(Matty)

Indicating potential social causal factors in the development (Quentin), and maintenance of BD in spite of individual efforts to overcome it (Matty), these comments challenge the validity of assumptions which position responsibility for BD at the individual level.

### **Men learn to compensate for physical losses.**

Within more general discussion surrounding male BI (i.e. not specifically addressing the young men's disclosures in dataset 1), many readers referenced wider social systems of male competition:

You have to do the best you can with what you've got [...] If the game is overly rigged against you (i.e. standards of beauty are genuinely unreachable), maybe you need to try an alternative culture group and find a different way to compete.  
(Odin)

Here, Odin recognises that mediated body ideals may be unobtainable. However, rather than questioning the validity of appearance ideals, Odin situates these ideals within a wider social system of competition, appearing to suggest that divergence from ideals can be mitigated by means unrelated to appearance. Below, Phil extends this discussion by offering an example:

I think you pick your battles. You could be a loser in the sense that you have no money, for example, but a winner in that you're respected and well liked or successful in your chosen area. In other words you don't need to be a winner in every strand of your life  
(Phil)

I think adults all know – although sometimes even they forget – that there are many wonderful, popular and confident men who are short/fat/skinny or who have bad skin/hair/teeth or whatever. [...] man can more easily compensate (in the eyes of society if not individuals) for lacking those attributes, mainly by accentuating

their strengths in other areas.  
(Phil)

As a general topic of conversation, BD as a concept of male concern is seen to become almost obsolete. Indeed, addressing this topic in relation to a wider understanding of social competition, readers appeared to position physical appearance as a single factor in an implicit measurement scale, in which individuals negotiate perceived shortcomings by projecting their socially desirable traits to increase status. While positioned negatively (e.g. bad skin) in terms of competition, perceived physical deficits are presented as secondary to the positive traits of confidence and popularity. By implying that all adults are aware of this ‘fact’, young men’s understanding and purposeful utilisation of this implicit measurement scale is assumed to develop with maturity. Intriguingly, Phil specifies that methods of compensation may not be individually beneficial, yet seen positively by society. As such, this indicates that subjective wellbeing of the individual may be credited as less significant than its outward expression.

## Discussion

The young men’s accounts (dataset 1) echo previous findings of stigmatisation surrounding the discussion of BI by men (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006; Kehler and Atkinson, 2015) – but they also suggest that provided with the right opportunity, young men may welcome the chance to disclose personal issues and deliberate on pertinent influencing factors. Juxtaposed with personal stories as a recognition of powerful gendered ideals preventing meaningful discussion of BD by young men (while encouraging disclosure by young women), these accounts indicate that whilst BD may not be considered by young men as a gendered issue affecting only women, the disclosure and discussion of BD remains shrouded in femininity. Given that negative appearance-related discussion such as ‘fat talk’ (while in fact suggested to be contributing to women’s body dissatisfaction) has been presented as a socially perceived norm for women (Engeln et al., 2013), this is unsurprising. Therefore, while this point provides further support for the requirement of gender-specific educational materials (McCabe et al., 2017; Yager et al., 2013), it appears essential that for young men, such interventions go beyond attempting to increase disclosure of BD, addressing both gender-related barriers to discussion and the suggested requirement for increased critical engagement with prevailing male body ideals.

In general, readers (dataset 2) took up a subject position of authority to discuss the disclosure of BD by young men, largely underpinned by an assumption that BD is associated with adolescence, stereotypically understood as a time of internal conflict and anxiety (Arnett, 1999). Additionally, many reader comments worked to position BD at the individual level, allowing readers to locate the issues raised within the young men’s disclosures (dataset 1) as isolated within the developmental stage of the young men, and/or as a result of avoidable individual self-neglect. This positioning appears to be underpinned by wider discourses of individual responsabilisation within health promotion - pervasive in public dissemination materials – which situate some diseases

and adverse outcomes as partially avoidable if particular lifestyle choices are made (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). As such, there is little to no consideration of social, cultural, political, and economic factors which may restrict an individual's choice, such as occupation, or underlying health issues. Nonetheless, by drawing upon this dominant social discourse, readers were able to distance themselves from, and invalidate issues presented by the young men as consequential across the lifespan, or as a wider social issue. Thus, the motivation for young men to conceal any discontent that may be associated with self-neglect, or deemed of little lasting consequence by others, is perhaps obvious; providing further support for previous speculation that reported rates of BD in young men may not be a true representation of prevalence (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006; Pope et al., 2000).

Not only does this positioning suggest a lack of understanding regarding sociocultural influence in the development of BI-related issues (e.g. Girard et al., 2018; Stratton et al., 2015; Tylka, 2011; Dryer et al., 2016; Kenny et al., 2017; Vries et al., 2016), but also of the continuation of appearance-related concerns throughout adulthood, for both men and women (Halliwell and Dittmar, 2003); in which men in particular may only see a slight reduction across the lifespan in terms of BD (Esnaola et al., 2010). Interestingly, in contrast to readers' comments explicitly related to the body-related concerns of young men, utilisation of competition discourses for a more general discussion of the topic was evident. Indeed, when deliberating male BI in general, appearance-related concerns began to be discussed in relation to competing within an implicit social system of measurement, offering the opportunity for individuals to negotiate their position positively by enhancing and displaying socially desirable characteristics. In the context of BI, learning how to compensate for any supposed physical inadequacy by focusing on more socially favourable attributes was presented as an activity undertaken by mature men. Resultantly, whilst seemingly adopted by readers as a further distancing strategy from the worries of young men, this does have further consequences for our understanding of male BI.

Taking this forward, the suggested measurement system appears harmonious with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, a socially constructed, yet largely unobtainable ideal male gender expression (Connell, 2008). Indeed, despite its ideological nature, the supreme position apportioned to this ideal means that the majority of men will endeavour to aspire to these standards. As such, negotiating individual masculine status is characterised by degree of conformity to hegemonic ideals. With regards to BI, whilst individuals may experience BD, non-disclosure may be understood as offering the potential to minimise the reduction of status, by simulating confidence. In addition, BD may be reduced by focusing upon favourable masculine attributes unrelated to the body, such as occupational success and parenting status, to increase individual masculine 'capital' (e.g. De Visser et al., 2009). Certainly, our findings suggest that disclosure of any emotional effects of BD may be considered to threaten a more severe decrease in status than any noticeable physical flaw. As such, our findings may offer additional explanation for research evidence indicating that young men are expected to 'laugh off' instances of body-related teasing (CREDOS, 2016; Taylor, 2011), which can be understood as a defensive strategy in the face of challenges to individual status (Barnes, 2012).

Our study indicates that readers appeared to equate open disclosure as an indication of immaturity, a failure to understand and negotiate the masculine economy. As such, concealment is normalized throughout the course of development, whereby BD is not reduced, but ignored in favour of presenting the more socially valued masculine trait of confidence (whether this is authentic or feigned). Therefore, it could be that the linear reduction in BD in women across the lifespan (Esnaola et al., 2010), as well as female reported rates over time (Karazsia et al., 2017), is not observed in men due to the wider social influence of masculine ideologies which promote repression of dissatisfaction or feigned satisfaction in regards to the body (Karazsia et al., 2017: 304-305). Additionally, we suggest that relative lack of success that non-gender specific BI interventions have reported for males (Bird et al., 2013; McCabe, Ricciardelli and Karantzas, 2010) may result from a deficit in focus upon more implicit social ideals surrounding masculinity.

Finally, despite the suggestion by Aaron that young men ‘*don’t*’ talk about BI, our study indicates that the opportunity to discuss the topic was welcomed. However, in light of the findings presented here, we suggest that young men may often feel they *cannot* talk about BI in order to maintain social (masculine) status. As such, with the variation in data collection methods utilised within previous studies, it could be that rates for male BD are erroneously represented within the current literature, due to a tendency for non-disclosure. This line of reasoning would go some way in explaining the current inconsistency in academic research findings surrounding the pervasiveness of male BD (British Youth Council, 2017). Clearly, non-disclosure of BD not only presents obstacles to gaining authentic research insight, but more importantly may pose a potential barrier to accessing help or advice for those in need. Therefore, with the cluster of negative health-related outcomes associated with BD, as well as the wider social issue of a suggested stigmatisation surrounding help-seeking behaviours in general (both previously mentioned and evident within our data), developing strategies to deconstruct perceived structural barriers to discussion are essential.

## Reflexive analysis

The research process was guided by a critical realist perspective; a meta-philosophical position which acknowledges subjective elements within the process of knowledge production (Pilgrim, 2018:53). Thus, it is essential that we, the researchers, continually explored our positions as the purposeful sculptors throughout this study, and how our individual positions worked collectively to construct the findings presented. Therefore, it is important to note that the data source was not initially located for the purpose of analysis, but was the result of an internet search for widely accessible representation and discussion surrounding young male BD; a preliminary step in a larger project on young male appearance and body related wellbeing issues being undertaken by (first named author). However, discussion between the research team (all authors), uncovered a collective awareness of the significance of the article and subsequent public discussion for social understanding of male BD.

Evidently then, analysis began with the pre-assumption that the data in question, and the messages contained within, posed some level of social significance. In addition, (first named author), who conducted initial analyses noted that her reading of the article prior to the process of familiarisation had elicited feelings of sadness as a result of the disclosures in dataset 1, as well as some level of disbelief towards a perceived lack of empathy within some of the comments in dataset 2. Therefore, the identification of emotional impact in response to data, as well as potential implications for analysis and interpretation was discussed and evaluated among the research team on several occasions. This was an important step in the research process, that allowed the researchers (none of whom could personally identify with the young men in dataset 1) to highlight and challenge our assumptions and their potential impact on the findings presented.

## **Limitations, strengths and future research**

Whilst the findings from this study provide insights into subjective experiences of BD in young men and the wider social discourses which impinge on these experiences, we identify some limitations to this research. First, the data were sourced from one online newspaper article, which may mean that the individual disclosures analysed (dataset 1) may have been subject to journalistic editing. In addition, whilst these personal accounts suggested that the opportunity to disclose body worries was welcomed, only five were included within the original article; a relatively small number. Furthermore, with no way of knowing the reach of the original journalist request for participation, or the total number of responses received, it is possible that these were the only participants recruited from the self-select sampling method; who are also likely to have an enhanced interest in the area of research (Billieux et al., 2014). Second, due to the type of data source utilised in this study, we were unable to ascertain age, sexuality, or ethnicity of respondents. Therefore, both the disclosing young men and comment section contributors may be disproportionately homogenous in their views and concerns, compared to possible wider variance that may be observed using alternative means of data collection.

With that said, the findings of this study offer some important insights and critical considerations for future research with young men surrounding potentially sensitive issues such as BD. First, our findings indicate that while young men may welcome the opportunity to disclose and critically discuss BI concerns, this willingness may be contingent upon explicit justification and validation for male discussion, as well as anonymous participation to protect against potential reduction in social status associated with disclosure of dissatisfaction. In addition, our findings indicate that further understanding is required in relation to how masculine ideals may both obstruct discussion of male BI and reproduce ideologies which restrict disclosure of BD in young men. As such, we suggest that future research looks to adopt methods which enable anonymous participation, as well as allowing participants to actively engage in critical debate surrounding social understandings of male BI. Further, given that our findings indicate that discourses surrounding young male BI appear to underestimate socio-cultural factors in the development and experience of BD, we suggest increased public dissemination of educational materials on this topic.



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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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